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AUTHOR McPherson, Andrew; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Governing bodies that are quasi-rational, representative, and democratic are accountable to those they govern in much the same way that social scientists are accountable to the academic community. Since they both appeal to rationality as the basis of their actions, governments and scientists must use epistemologically adequate procedures to produce, test, and judge the accounts they offer of their activities. These procedures invoke the following principles: intersubjectivity, openness, skepticism, and universality of participation. The first half of this document discusses the notions of "accounts" and "accountability"; the characteristics of governing bodies, their actions, and their accounts of themselves; and the nature of social science research and accounts of such research. The second part of the document defines the notion of collaborative research and describes the Collaborative Research Programme, a 3-year effort to decentralize the use and control of a periodic national survey of school-leavers in Scotland. This program attempts to make the aspects of the survey related to social science research more adequate epistemologically, while simultaneously promoting political accountability by providing the data and the theoretical bases necessary for appropriate government action. (Author/PGD)

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Social Explanation and Political Accountability:

Two Related Problems with a Single Solution

Andrew McPherson

Charles D. Raab

David Raffae

Paper presented to the Symposium on Accountability
at the Annual Conference of the British Educational
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Centre for Educational Sociology
University of Edinburgh

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1. Introduction

A number of terms do double service in the vocabularies of politics and of academic social science; "representation" is one, and "account" is another. The idea of "an account" or "accounting" is itself unusually varied. To "give an account" is to tell a story; to "give an account of oneself" is to tell a story and also explain, justify, and persuade. When, however, one "gives a good (bad) account of oneself" by one's actions, the construction is made by others, who infer the story and the explanation from first-hand observation and reach a judgement for themselves or "on their own account". To be "of no account" is to be unimportant, of no consequence, without a reserve of acquired or inherited credit. To provide a "statement of accounts" for a company is to express performance in terms of income and expenditure; a "national economic (or social) account" is a set of indices which can be used for various policy and macroanalytic purposes.

We shall argue that it is no accident that the idea of an account, in common usage, should be part of the languages of art and science (account as narration, explanation and analysis), and of social and political relationships (account as justification); and no accident, either, that it can refer both to the "primary" data of observed action and also to the linguistic and other symbols through which unobserved actions are recorded, related, and judged. This range of reference of the idea of an account, reflecting, as it does, the interdependence of the two worlds of social science and of social and political relationships, foreshadows the main argument of this paper: that the practice of an epistemologically adequate social science and of political accountability share a unique set of characteristics. A good research programme reinforces and is reinforced by political accountability; it will sometimes have to promote social and political change in order to improve both that accountability and its own quality as social science.

Our argument is illustrated in section 6 with examples from a three-year-old programme of research and action in the Scottish education system that we and our colleagues at the Centre have undertaken in the light of this argument. We are aiming to change the relationship of knowledge

to control in a substantial part of the Scottish system. If this programme, and others like it, persistently fail to achieve change, then limits to the accountability of public systems, and to the possibilities of social explanation, would have to be explicitly incorporated both in the political theory of our society and in the epistemology of social science. We ourselves should have to account for our pursuit of the unattainable, to explain and to justify it.

Conversely, if the theory underlying these programmes proves to be valid, their practice will lead to a new form of social science, sustained by and underpinning a form of legitimation which currently exists only as an ideal in the theory of democratic politics, and offering, as we shall argue in the final sections, solutions to a number of current methodological dilemmas.

2. Some terms and problems

Government and politics As with "accounts" and "accountability", we also interpret "government" and "politics" broadly with a view to the generalisability of our argument. Thus "government" refers to those who legitimately hold office or positions of power in *any* institutional setting including the state. Our discussion is intended to apply to any area of public life, such as housing or the economy. In education this setting may be the classroom, the local education authority, the entire education system, or other units. Where we mean particularly central or local government, we use the term "state". "Political" actions are also broadly defined to include actions taken by, and in relation to, government, as here defined. Although much of this paper is most readily understood in terms of the state, we believe that most of the arguments can be generalised to the government of any institution that satisfies the conditions of quasi-rational, representative democracy.

Quasi-rational, representative democracy For the sake of simplicity, and without offering an exhaustive definition of a type of state system or of government, we point to several relevant characteristics of "quasi-rational, representative democracy" which entail a particular concept of accountability:

(a) quasi-rational Power becomes legitimate authority partly through rational principles and practices, of which the most important involve judgments of governmental performance. The procedures by which power-holders acquire or retain their positions, whether by election or by appointment, also have a rational foundation in rules to which members assent however much they may disapprove of the actions performed by government. But it is not enough merely to be legitimate: government must appear to know how to govern well, and, although this is problematical as we shall see later, there must be some substance behind the appearance. This is not to say that there are no elements of tradition or charisma in a polity of this type; nor that there is nothing rhetorical or symbolic about political arguments, actions, or procedures for installation; nor that "rationality" itself is not often a rhetorical device. A state, for example, may not intend to behave as rationally as it purports to do, and citizens may be unable adequately to judge the rationality of the state's actions even if they have all the information they need. But the very fact that political parties and others periodically declare their aims and claim to be able to achieve them opens their actions to rational appraisal and puts severe limits on arbitrary conduct. How amenable such actions are to effective rationality is an important but separate question; hence the qualified term "quasi-rational". The main point is that predominantly traditional or charismatic government does not run this particular risk of exposure, nor does it have an interest in objective knowledge as a means of maintaining authority.

(b) representative Whether owing to size, complexity, or other problems of communication, relationships between members and government are occasional and based on second-hand, that is not face-to-face, knowledge. Procedures or formulae are employed by people in intermediate roles to *re-present* the views of members to those in authority, and *vice versa*; hence the institutions of *representative* democracy. This of course does not mean that members do not experience the actions of government at first-hand; nor that second-hand communications do not often have the semblance of immediacy.

(c) democratic The exercise of authority is open to influence and change by members. This is not to say that all government actions are so influenced or that influence is always exerted directly in populist fashion;

much here depends on size alone. But where elites or representatives perform this function, they are themselves accountable to the members at large.

We are only concerned here, therefore, with the problem of accountability in systems which are already ostensibly grounded in reason but in which the realisation of democracy (as defined above) may be in doubt because of the failure of the representative function (as defined above) to cope with problems besetting contemporary society and its governmental forms. To repeat: we include in the latter not only the state, but also other institutions in which authority is exercised.

Accounts and accountability We can now usefully distinguish three senses of "accountability":

(a) on a weak definition, it means the obligation of government to report back, to "give an account of its actions";

(b) on a stronger definition, it means the above and also implies that members have some means by which they can interrogate the accounts that government produces and, indeed, produce other accounts ("on their own account") where those of government are felt to be unsatisfactory;

(c) on the strongest definition, it means both of the above and also implies that sanctions can be brought to bear on government where members - the proportion and their organisation may vary - agree that government has "given a bad account of itself", either through its (in)actions or through its own unsatisfactory production of an account, although these two senses should be distinguished. The members thus "hold government to account"; in the extreme case, they may replace the personnel of government.

These last two definitions imply that government may be said to be "giving an account of itself" in its action; that is, that members experience and evaluate the action directly, whether or not they are also given a story. For example, the head teachers of a local authority may infer something of that authority's policies from the level of resources their schools receive, the way in which they must be obtained, and other circumstances. The "account" thus inferred may or may not be that which the local authority itself would give if pressed. However, for this inference

to lead to an adequate account, it would also have to refer to the intentions of government in order to distinguish between the intended, the unintended but expected, and the unexpected outcomes of government action. Hence action-as-account entails a weak and incomplete sense of accountability. It is nevertheless important because, as we shall show, it draws attention to the gap between expectations and outcomes and also to the precariousness of government's "presentation of self" in the face of events that threaten the image it seeks to present. Moreover, in the absence of explicit statements, government's intentions must often be inferred from action, as also they must when there is doubt about government's honesty or ability.

Although actions must be considered part of an account, the account must also include descriptions and explanations of actions, for two further reasons. First, reference must be made to the intentions of the actor and to his own understanding, or theory, of his situation and how he might act in it. All purposive action is implicitly or explicitly predicated on theories of what the world is like and of how it works. Second, most actions are invisible and need to be *re-presented*. Since government is itself (by definition - see the opening of section 2) a major actor, the accounts it provides, incorporating expressions of its intentions and its "theory" of the situation, are essential for accountability. In section 4 we discuss the role of government as a producer of accounts and some of the problems it faces in producing adequate accounts of institutional performance. In section 5 we will consider the potential and problems of academic social research as an alternative producer of accounts, and return to the theme that the authority of government is necessary for the production of adequate accounts. First, however, we spell out some of the requirements of an adequate account in quasi-rational, representative democracies, and the procedures for accountability which these indicate.

3. Rules for accountability

In this section we argue that the epistemological procedures by which we produce an account, test it and judge it to be adequate are the same as the political procedures implied by the normative idea of accountability. Some of these procedures might be summarised in terms of the following principles: intersubjectivity, openness, scepticism and universality of participation.

Epistemological procedures An adequate account, as we have suggested, must include not only a "factual" description of the actions of government and the areas on which government acts, but also the "theories" which guide these actions. Such "theories" are often left implicit in the selection and definition of the terms in which accounts are expressed. If the legitimacy of government is based on claims to rationality, the procedures for effective accountability must press these theories to become explicit.

More generally, if the accounts of government are to withstand challenge, they must be rational; that is, their claims to knowledge must be scientifically made. This involves the following activities:

- (1) describing the world in terms that are (a) comprehensible by, and communicable to, others; (b) general in application; and (c) relatively stable in their meaning over time;
- (2) attempting to anchor these terms, or their derivatives, in data;
- (3) attempting to replicate the observations and analysis;
- (4) facilitating their replication or their testing by others, through openness; that is, through making public and explicit the bases of one's own actions or procedures or analysis;
- (5) scepticism; that is, the active canvassing of alternative ways of observing and explaining;
- (6) engaging in argument with peers who have themselves enjoyed equivalent opportunities to categorise, observe, and explain.

At any moment, the boundaries of scientific knowledge are determined through procedures by which free and public assent is given to accounts that have been produced in this way. Scientific procedures may therefore be thought of as a system of rules and practices by which consensus may be reached on certain propositions by endeavouring to minimise the role of partiality or sectional interest. Although a proposition may be consensually held whilst being false, one reason why scientific procedures are less likely than any other procedures to produce or sustain such mistakes is their emphasis on the generality of concepts and the universality of participation. Scientific procedures are framed so as to regard the experience of all persons as potentially "of some account". The normative world that they imply is that of an accountable democracy.

It follows from this that adequate social explanations ought, in principle, to be intelligible to the persons whom they describe.⁽¹⁾ This must be argued on the grounds that universality makes for better social science; also that the testing, through action, of propositions about men requires their participation as investigators, not merely as objects of investigation. An adequate account of government actions must explain the consequences of those actions; in producing such accounts government relies upon the capacity of the members upon whom it acts themselves to produce accounts of how they have experienced those actions, or at least upon the ability of third parties to produce accounts which members may regard as *re-presentations* reflecting, or consistent with, their own experiences. Hence the generation of an adequate governmental account depends upon the possibility of members' accounts, and that possibility in turn depends upon how far members are allowed, and are technically able, to provide them. As we will show, government itself, and especially the state, is a key determinant of these normative and technical possibilities; it can enhance or constrict them, and in so doing can influence the extent of its own accountability and ultimately, therefore, the knowledgeability of society as a whole.

Political conditions The main point is simply made: "accountability" implies a large, if not universal (in terms of the membership of the unit concerned), audience for the actions that are to be judged; the context and consequences of most actions will therefore be invisible to most members, and also to government. Second-hand accounts, *re-presenting* those actions, are therefore required: the story must be told. But the story must allow of explanation and justification of the actions it recounts in terms of

(1) There is, however, a counter-argument to the view that universality of participation is intrinsic to scientific procedure. It is sometimes argued that it is sufficient if science is practised only by an elite or professional community of experts who have been inducted into skills and techniques which are not available to all members. Our argument in this paper entails the view that such elites must also be accountable in the strongest sense. We recognise that the stipulation that explanations must be "intelligible to" their referents raises many questions: for example, how far must men be re-educated for intelligibility to obtain? Must the terms and ideas be common currency in the society, or at least translatable into common parlance? Whatever the case, intelligibility is a precondition of the scientific community's being certain that counter-examples are not overlooked and can be freely adduced. It is also a precondition of the testing of propositions through action. This is an argument we develop in section 8.

concepts that could be universally recognised by the audience. Although the audience may be internally differentiated, the stories told to all sections must in some sense be comparable and interchangeable. Failing these requirements, accountability remains unrealised.

At the same time, if the audience is to be able to challenge accounts effectively, it must have access not only to the "results" of the accounts (the single figure representing the balance on the balance sheet) but also to the raw data from which they have been produced. Further still, the audience must have the means to re-define the concepts in terms of which the accounts have been expressed, to articulate alternative perspectives, and to supply these with evidence which may itself be new. This requires that the audience does not simply have access to accounts as *products*; it must somehow be involved with the *process* of their production.

The argument that accounts depend upon procedures in the public realm can thus be made in terms of the conditions surrounding the generation of data. But it can also be made in terms of the conditions that sustain the testing of theory; that is, the determination of which of several accounts is the most adequate.

Public reproducibility is a cardinal criterion of scientific practice. What we are stressing is that this practice is indicated by the normative concept of governmental accountability. The latter requires that accounts of governments' actions, whether produced by governments or by others, be framed in terms that are public and universal, and hence in principle capable of sustaining *agreed* modifications of action. It also implies that governments are fallible and need alternative sources for producing and reproducing accounts. In its strongest sense (where members can apply sanctions to governments which have given bad accounts of themselves) accountability requires adequate procedures for indicating to all members the preferability of one account's explanation to any others. It is in terms of this preferred account that the (in)actions of governments might then be corrected. *Unagreed* modifications to public action have nothing to do with accountability.

We have suggested that both scientific and political criteria indicate

the same set of procedures for making choices between competing accounts. Moreover, in the context of accountability, no choice of this kind is likely to be purely scientific or purely political: even if they were different, the scientific and political rules would still have to be made consistent with each other simply because they cannot but be applied simultaneously. The process of accountability requires that one account be at least provisionally "agreed" upon (whatever the rules by which agreement is to be reached) as a basis for evaluating present action and for considering changes in action. Values are inescapably involved in any choice between competing accounts and only political procedures can determine what part different values should play in the process of reaching agreement. Even when values are not disputed, purely scientific procedures are rarely sufficient to reach agreement on the *scientific* value of competing accounts; in practice they would need to be supplemented by social conventions which, in the context of accountability, would have to be made consistent with the principles of representative democracy. For the perspective of science is in a sense timeless, and the application of scientific procedures to the knowledge available at *any one time* can only go so far in assisting agreed choice among competing explanations. Accountability, however, requires that agreements nevertheless be reached, albeit provisionally, as the basis for action in the short run. There is therefore a need for conventional procedures or decision rules (which may work more or less adequately but which do not necessarily have the intrinsic rationality of timeless scientific procedures) to assist choice (in conjunction with scientific rules) among competing theories and explanations of the social world, as well as among rival value positions. The rationality of such conventions must obviously be maximised; but so, in a democracy, must their conformity with the political principles of democracy. The corollary, of course, almost goes without saying: the rational (scientific) element in the process of choosing an account should be maximised, and values and interests should never be the sole basis for choice wherever scientific procedures and knowledge are able to inform them. From both points of view, the political procedures of accountability must be integrated as far as possible with the scientific procedures for resolving disputes.

To summarise this section: both scientific and political considerations point to the same set of criteria which the production of accounts must

satisfy. These are that accounts should be addressed to a universal audience, including those whose actions are described in the accounts; that they should be intelligible, at least in principle, to this entire audience; that the actor should make the grounds of his action explicit; that the terms of these accounts should, moreover, be amenable to informed challenge; that, more generally, scepticism about the terms and content of accounts should be encouraged; that procedures, both scientific and political, must exist for resolving disputes; and that, where agreement is reached, changes in public action can result.

It is the failure to develop such procedures that lies at the heart of the problem of political accountability and the problem of scientific social explanation; in neither case can we *re-present* human experience in a manner that could ever require all to assent to a provisional explanation or justification of behaviour.

4. The production of accounts by government

In a quasi-rational, representative democracy the warrant for public confidence is the validation of government's claim to be acting rationally, rather than traditionally or charismatically. In part, this type of government rests its authority on the claim that it knows the correct course of action and is in fact undertaking it. Confidence is intrinsic to the general notion of authority yet, paradoxically, a political system of this kind appeals for public confidence on the grounds of its foundation in procedures of scientific enquiry which themselves ultimately enshrine scepticism as a reigning principle. It is this antinomy which provides the context for government's production of accounts and renders that production highly problematic under current arrangements.

We do not argue that, at present, government enjoys a high degree of public confidence; nor that, if it does, it ought to be replaced by scepticism *tout court*. Our argument concerns, rather, the basis upon which *any* degree of confidence rests. That basis strongly determines the adequacy of accounts and accountability. To explain this we must make a distinction between *types* of confidence (or scepticism).

To continue the argument of the previous section: to the extent that they are experienced merely as products to be passively accepted or rejected, government's accounts are inadequate. Thus when they are not amenable to informed challenge or active re-negotiation, the citizen's confidence in, or scepticism about, the state's accounts must mainly take shape from his observations of political images, personalities and symbols, and rests only to a negligible extent upon the outcome of any critical discussion in the public realm. To the extent that such images inspire confidence, a condition of inferior accountability is reinforced, and there are disincentives to its improvement. When public confidence or scepticism is aroused solely by the emphasis placed upon the motivations and private behaviour of politicians and officials, it is very different from the reasoned scepticism which underpins scientific investigation; indeed such an emphasis is a substantial disincentive to the practice of such scepticism because it exposes all public acknowledgements of fallibility to misinterpretation; government rarely wins votes by saying that it does not know what is going on, or what to do.

In the longer term, however, it is in the interest of government that confidence in it has at least some basis in its willingness to practise, promote or tolerate a reasoned scepticism. In such circumstances government can more easily acknowledge that gaps exist between problems and available explanations or between the intended and actual outcomes of action. The recognition of such gaps is a crucial precondition for any public learning that seeks to draw on the methods of social science; only government has the resources and continuity to routinise such recognitions. Moreover, if government does not do this, gaps will tend to emerge only when they are deliberately exposed by those wishing to discredit government.

In the shorter term, of course, government tends not to welcome such openness. It is usually possible for opponents to argue that there were insufficient grounds for a particular action or that there is insufficient evidence of its success. This will tend to inhibit public learning if government adopts certain tactics to pre-empt such challenges. For example, before acting, it might be deliberately vague about its intentions and it might withhold from public discussion information on the context of its action (say, a description of the problems it is seeking to solve). After

acting, and in the light of the outcomes, it might only selectively release information about circumstances and results. When it conducts itself in these ways, government "gives a good account of itself" by retrospectively narrowing the gap between the expected and observed outcomes in order to maintain public confidence and to renew the possibility of subsequent action.

Three further factors limit the extent to which government can embrace and promote reasoned public scepticism. The first concerns the very exigency of action. All actions are conceived and implemented in situations of more or less imperfect information about contexts and consequences; rationality is thus "bounded", and the ways to widen the bounds may be by no means obvious or easy to pursue. In the short run, the state's, or indeed any government's, need to act quickly to satisfy its own timetable or public expectations often militates against its finding and using knowledge in policy-making. Even when government does admit to ignorance, it might only set in train one-off information-gathering processes which are publicly couched in the argument that the "facts" will contract or eliminate the area of uncertainty that exists in the environment of policy-making; having presented its *product* the Royal Commission can then go home, the working party or study group can be disbanded. This is very different from sustaining a continuing *process* of scientific enquiry as we have described it.

Then, second, there is the problem of control, on which the previous section has already touched. Where information collected by government may also be used for the purpose of control, those supplying it may tend to distort it to the degree (a) that they do not recognise the authority of government to solicit the information, (b) that they are affected by government actions based on the information they supply (e.g., the state's allocation of resources based on information supplied to the state by potential recipients) and (c) that government cannot monitor the situation independently of members' accounts. Whilst such external monitoring is normally possible to some degree, the information thereby produced is rarely adequate in its own right for the purposes of social science and is, moreover, produced by means which themselves act on and change the situation that requires monitoring; the use of external examinations

to monitor school, teacher and pupil performance is a familiar example. Adequate information can only be produced with the agreement and active co-operation of those who are being described. Whilst democratic government in pluralist societies has constantly to negotiate this agreement, it must also ultimately enforce compliance from those who disagree.

Even when this agreement is obtained, a third problem is raised. The categories and procedures through which government elicits information tend to be those used in the execution of policy, especially when the information is obtained through the records of everyday activities. Such categories and procedures inevitably embody the theories underlying government action and are therefore inadequate or inappropriate for the critical examination of policy; they cannot inform alternative perspectives and explanations if these must be expressed in terms of a different set of categories. Moreover, the accounts so produced are separated from the experiential knowledge of members and give little opportunity for them to use such knowledge in their evaluation of policy and in their exercise of influence.

In short, as a result of the conditions and limitations we have described, the accounts which government produces tend, from the point of view of social science, to be limited in scope, prone to inaccuracy, lacking in analytical perspective and unsuitable as bases for the constructive critique of current policy.

5. Academe and the production of accounts

We have suggested that the accounts generated by government are inadequate to sustain the strongest of the senses of accountability listed in section 2, and are also epistemologically inadequate. Such shortcomings are often held to justify the independent role of *academe* in researching policy-relevant social issues. Insofar as it is separated from governmental authority, academic research avoids most of the problems faced by government. However, this very separation also restricts the value and validity of academic research, for it follows from our conception of accountability that the production of adequate accounts requires authority of the kind possessed by government.

There are four main reasons why the production of accounts requires an authority that *academe* lacks. First, it is a commonplace that academic social science is under-resourced. But in order to produce adequate accounts *academe* would require more than a merely quantitative increase in funding; a qualitative change would be required in the resources on which it could draw.

The production of an adequate account presupposes a capacity for the repeated observation of consistently and exhaustively defined categories. Without this capacity, accounts could not be expressed in terms that were general, intersubjective (this is, permitting debate and testing through replications) and capable of development over time. The authority of government is essential to the creation and support of the means by which categories may be identified and the actions of members observed and *re-presented*. This is because the involvement of government makes possible what would otherwise be an inconceivably expensive undertaking, given the current organisation of research. The point is not so much that government, and especially the state, has the authority to command large financial resources, although this certainly is a consideration. It is rather that, in any system in which membership confers rights and imposes obligations, members have to identify themselves periodically to government in order to exercise these rights; and government, in its turn, must identify members to ensure that they discharge their obligations. The maintenance of control frames, that is, social structures by which "categories may be identified and the actions of members observed and *re-presented*", is therefore a routine function of government. What is more, it is through the initiatives of members themselves that control frames are created and revised: either voluntarily, because otherwise members will not receive the benefits of membership; or in response to the authority of government, which can demand that persons with obligations identify themselves and which can impose sanctions on those who do not. Moreover, the complex mesh of rights and obligations attached to membership of any institution means that government and members share an interest in maintaining the control frames which allow for the control of members by government and *vice versa*. For example, the use of the National Health Service makes it difficult to evade the registration of a new birth; this, in its turn, allows claims for benefit to be made (for both parent and child); these, in their turn, facilitate the imposition of

further obligations such as education. Suitably organised, control frames can be made into a powerful resource for research, for they can also be treated as "knowledge frames" that allow one to sample and observe. The wonder of this resource is its economy: control frames are generated through members' initiatives that have been undertaken either *voluntarily* or in response to governmental authority exercised for other purposes; in relation to the hidden resource which these recurrent initiatives constitute, the explicit financial component of its cost is small.

We would take as examples of control frames electoral registers, censuses, school and university rolls and records, and the records of an examination board; indeed most of the records of Weberian rational bureaucracy. The crucial question to ask is this: without access to these established control frames, what scale of resources would be required to ascertain and repeatedly observe the population of adults in a given community, the membership of a school, and so on? It is doubtful whether a mere increase in financial resources could ever give social science the ability to achieve this.

It is thus no accident that *academe* itself directly or indirectly uses established control frames, especially for sampling (e.g., electoral registers or school rolls). It would have virtually to *become* government in order to command the resources which its theories would indicate; under present arrangements this is no solution. From this point of view the existence of government and the state, and the rights and obligations entailed in the concept of membership (and especially of citizenship), are preconditions for the practice of a critical social science as we envisage it. For unless the knowledge potential of control frames can be tapped, no resources that are adequate to sustain wide public participation will ever be found.⁽¹⁾

(1) Authority, membership and control, in other words, not only make public knowledge desirable; they also make it possible. This is not to argue that the information stored in control frames is necessarily authoritative; it is not. People may slip through the net; membership categories may be disputed and whole groups may be excluded from the public record. Part of the job of a critical social science, and of other agencies, is precisely to judge the validity of the established record. But this does not detract from the central point: that control frames can be adapted to allow social science to draw on the immense resource of the reciprocal initiatives of members and government.

There is a second sense in which the production of adequate social accounts depends upon authority. Social science commonly makes inferences about relationships between social objects through its observation of those relationships in naturally varying situations. This method is essentially non-interventionist (though simple observation itself usually involves intervention of a type) and conservative; its projection of human possibilities is limited by the range of variation that already exists. Planned interventions can extend this range but as they are political acts they must be carried out by government, or on its authority. For the interventions to sustain satisfactory learning there is a need for intelligent co-operation; that is, the persons implementing them must both understand and agree to try to implement the actions required of them. This is also to say that the interventions are authorised. A similar argument can be made in relation to the way one learns from routine government actions that would not normally be regarded as interventions.

Third, the executive function of government means that, in the absence of procedures for accountability, it alone has the capacity for "learning by doing", that is, for exploiting the information routinely acquired in the execution of policy. However, this is a conservative learning process, restricted to concepts embodied in the theories underlying current action. Unable to accommodate alternative concepts and theories, it is partial and not sufficient to sustain debate about rival possibilities. This kind of knowledge is nevertheless necessary for the production of accounts of government actions since it embodies the "theory" that underlies these actions.

Finally, because *academe* lacks the authority to command information, what information it does collect is often partial and distorted; those from whom it is sought can refuse to divulge it, or they might take few pains to ensure its accuracy.

From these four arguments it follows that the production of adequate accounts requires forms of authority which *academe* lacks. In response, *academe* often borrows the authority of government by making use of data collected through its established control frames. However, *academe* in this context faces the same problems as government when it produces accounts; these are the problems consequent on the connection between control and the

production of accounts. Although, by allowing independent researchers to use its resources to examine policy, government can encourage reasoned scepticism while not itself questioning the rationale of its actions, a point may arise when government considers the questioning of policy by outsiders to be dangerous, and withdraws its support. Moreover, the other problems faced by government when it produces accounts (as described in section 4), apply equally to *academe* when it borrows the resources of government.

Furthermore, *academe*, like government, has tended to issue accounts in a form which makes them inappropriate for the type of accountability we are considering. They are issued as finished products to be accepted or rejected wholesale, with limited opportunities for re-interpretation or re-analysis. Consequently neither the experience nor the criteria of relevance of those to whom the accounts are addressed can have much effect on any ensuing dialogue, for the terms of the dialogue have already been determined.

Up to this point we have depicted what may appear to be an intractable dilemma. On the one hand, our analysis of accountability implies that the production of adequate accounts requires authority of a kind that only government and sometimes perhaps only the state can possess; it cannot be done by *academe* alone. On the other hand, we have argued that processes by which government produces accounts, if it does, are inherently deficient. If this dilemma really is intractable, it requires that we revise our expectations of, and theories for, both (i) political accountability (which could never be achieved in the strongest sense that we have defined above) and (ii) epistemologically adequate social accounts which, under present arrangements, will always be starved of the vantage points, data, resources and opportunities for critical public discussion which they require.

In the next two sections we attempt to show how this dilemma can, however, be mitigated. We argue, first, from the experience of our current research which has set itself to change the intellectual, social and political conventions that govern most current social research and, second, from more general theoretical considerations.

6. The Collaborative Research Programme⁽¹⁾

This section describes a programme of "action research on research" through which we are trying to overcome the problems that the current organisation of research creates both for the production of social accounts that are epistemologically adequate and also for a fuller realisation of political accountability. The programme's aims are ambitious; possibly absurdly so. Some of our description inevitably, therefore, refers only to aims and hopes but the viability of at least some of these can be judged against our three years of experience.⁽²⁾

The Collaborative Research Programme has attempted to decentralise the use and control of a major means of knowledge production: a periodic national survey of school-leavers. In brief, it has tried, in principle, to extend the boundaries of the research team to encompass, with one exception, all participants in the upper secondary education system in Scotland together with those at its interface with tertiary education and employment. The exception, which we regret, is pupils themselves whom we have included only in limited ways. We are attempting, moreover, to institutionalise this decentralisation in the practices of central and local government and of the educational professions and organisations. The programme has quite deliberately tied itself to the authority of government; by our argument, it could do no other. But, at the same time, it has tried to make its processes and product more accountable to (intelligible to and controllable by) all participants in the education system, including the state.

The programme incorporates several features that are relevant to our arguments about the preconditions of good accounts. First, it uses data to *re-present* unobserved actions and experiences. Second, the data cover

(1) The programme is funded by the SSRC (HR 3262/1) and the Centre also receives funds from the SED. Edith Cope, John Gray and Joanne Lamb are our colleagues in the research team.

(2) Whilst we recognise the importance and interest of the questions, "Is it working? Will it work?", we are not attempting here to represent all of the experience that an independent critical evaluation might look to or even that part which lies within our own ken.

pupils of all achievement levels from all secondary schools in Scotland, and can sustain discussion and agreement on propositions that are more comprehensive and general than the experience of any individual. Third, the programme's research team shares with "collaborators", drawn from various positions in the education system, control over the definition of concepts, the selection of problems and the analysis and re-analysis of data.

The Scottish Education Data Archive (SEDA), which incorporates these three features, is a computer-held data-base constructed primarily from individual school-leavers' questionnaires. Response rates are high (around 80 per cent) and response biases are reduced by the differential weighting of returns on the basis of population figures supplied by central government. The SEDA contains information on each leaver's experiences from the third secondary year (14 years in Scotland) to approximately nine months after leaving school (17 years to 19 years). The information covers pupils who had taken SCE Highers examinations (roughly the top 30 per cent academically) who left in 1962, 1970, 1972 and 1976; O grade pupils (now constituting the 30th to the 70th percentile) who left in 1972 and 1976; and non-Certificate pupils who left in 1976 (the 70th to the 100th percentile; few pupils take CSE in Scotland). These data will be updated in 1978 and again, probably, in 1980. The information relates to family and school background, the full public examination record, the transition to tertiary education or (un)employment and various attitudes and beliefs. The most recent survey covers, in addition, the non-examined curriculum and a wide range of other school and post-school experiences.

The size of the most recent target sample (40 per cent) allowed a "rotating-version" questionnaire design which included both constant, core questions (sex, age, achievement, etc.) and non-core, or varying, questions administered to random subsets. This greatly increased the number of questions that could be asked, thereby making it easier to include questions contributed by collaborators. From an early stage, groups of practitioners and others helped the research team to collect the sample and contributed, scrutinised, and amended draft questions for the questionnaires. To some extent, alternative definitions of problems and concepts were thus brought to bear upon the survey instruments; as a result, the data can sustain

analyses from many disparate perspectives. The collaborative dialogue also helped bring the assumptions embodied in the questions nearer to the school leavers' experiences which the surveys were concerned to tap. It also made it more difficult for people subsequently to dissociate themselves from analysis on the grounds that the research instruments only embodied the perspectives of academic researchers. A second advantage of the large sample size in the most recent survey (more than 20,000 questionnaires were completed) is that the data can reliably be used for analysis on a variety of subsets, such as the Region, Division or area, the subject or institution, or the type of school.

Starting some eighteen months before the full programme of collaborative research began in 1975, the SEDA has been successfully developed precisely for and with educationists who have had no previous experience of computing and who have little time to give to the technicalities of survey research. The data can be retrieved from structured computer files using a simple survey analysis package, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). When linked to well-structured data and good documentation, SPSS brings data analysis within the reach of the practising teacher, adviser, administrator, Inspector and lecturer, as well as the academic researcher.

We have developed short courses that have helped nearly 200 persons to acquire the technical skills to interrogate the files and to begin to develop interpretative skills and a sense for the varying weight of evidence that the data can bear on any particular question. Over the last three years, about a quarter have conducted further analyses after the course. As the most recent data become more readily available and the courses themselves improve, that proportion is rising. Approximately ten groups, some national and some local, and 60 persons, have also used the SEDA without having attended courses.

The SEDA stores information not only in the raw form in which it appears on completed questionnaires, but also as aggregations of questionnaire data. The general user has available to him not just "information" but also a range of concepts or approaches that are embedded in the aggregations and which embody the understanding or expertise of their originators; for example, different ways of conceptualising a curriculum. Whilst this makes teaching and learning easier and facilitates the development of a

cumulative, research-based dialogue which draws on agreed concepts, the availability of raw data allows for the possibility of a critical re-appraisal in which those concepts may be challenged and reformulated through re-aggregations of the data. And whilst, obviously, the nature of these raw data is an ultimate constraint in any single survey, the collaborative process allows this to be renegotiated from one survey to the next. Within these limitations, which are considerably broader than those obtaining in conventionally organised surveys, control of knowledge is exercised neither through any immutability of the concepts that *re-present* (unobserved) experience nor through any finality of "results". In the collaborative model, by contrast, research does not have "results", but only temporary suspensions of critical dialogue.

Thus, in collaborative research, the state's account of its own activities is only one of a number of accounts that enter the domain of critical public discussion. One example must suffice: whilst the DES has been unable to persuade all of the English local authorities to supply even aggregated information on curriculum provision, the SEDA and the Collaborative Research Programme is sustaining public analyses and discussion of pupils' curricula by officials in central and local government and by teachers and advisers, operating locally and nationally, collectively and individually, as they evaluate the Scottish Munn Committee's recommendation of a core curriculum for all.

The first three preconditions (described earlier in this section) for the production of adequate accounts have concerned (i) the use of the SEDA to *re-present* experience in terms of data that are (ii) comprehensive and (iii) negotiable. Implicit in our discussion of these is another feature: (iv) the creation or enrichment of existing channels for dialogue in which collaborators can (a) set the evidence of personal and other experience against that of the data; (b) reach both collective and individual judgments about particular interpretations and about the varying weight of interpretation that the data can bear on any issue; (c) make explicit their value-positions and value-differences; and (d) make decisions concerning further collections of data. As mentioned earlier, working parties were formed amongst Regional educational administrators, college lecturers, careers officers and others, partly to help collect a sample and design the

survey questionnaires, but also to begin discussions of substantive educational issues on the basis of their diverse experience, as well as of data collected in pilots and previous surveys. These contacts have been maintained for this purpose as the SEDA becomes fully usable, and new linkages have been created amongst other categories of collaborators, such as Inspectors and teachers, who are able to carry on a dialogue with the data and with each other individually and in groups.

The *Collaborative Research Newsletter* publishes statements of research endeavours by collaborators and by members of the research team. These have pointed up areas of current concern, such as truancy, the curriculum and examinations, upon which SEDA data can be brought to bear for the purpose of policy analysis in the light of existing patterns and trends. The *Newsletter* also informs a wide constituency of the availability of SEDA courses and study groups. About 2,500 copies circulate every four months to actual and potential collaborators in every post-primary institution, to Inspectors, advisers, central and local administrators, university staff and officials, and many others.

There is thus an emerging network of collaborators having access to a body of data from a variety of vantage-points, some of them conflicting, from which they are able to initiate analyses, communicate them to others in public forms, and interrogate the analyses of others, without any presumption in favour of the superior legitimacy of academics' or governments' accounts. We see the machinery and communicative structures through which these activities are conducted as important developments in the scientific enterprise of sustaining and enriching the data-base as a continuing and changing resource for educational research. But beyond this, we see the network as constituting a potential public arena for the scrutiny and production of accounts, filling much of what we see as a void in the governance of education in Scotland and in its proper public accountability. The structures created by and within collaborative research exemplify, we hope, the social and political conditions for accountability and for social science that we outlined in section 3.

We find inappropriate the "linear" metaphor for research in which an "active" researcher disseminates to a passive and, he hopes, credulous practitioner "results" that are both incontrovertible and persuasive. We also find unhelpful the conventional demarcation between research on the one

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hand and, on the other, teaching (about that research) or practice related to the results of that research. We prefer, rather, to approach educational research from the assumption that information-seeking and theory-testing ("research" by another name) cannot help but be present at all times in all purposive thought and action; and that the formal organisation of educational research should recognise this by finding ways to draw on, enhance, and sustain intelligent behaviour in the day-to-day settings of educational practice. Many of our collaborators, of course, know this in their bones; hence much of the general distrust that practitioners feel for conventionally organised, linear, research "from the outside".

What collaborators have often welcomed, we think, has been the opportunity to take a research stance on their everyday activities, to observe their roles from the outside, sometimes to share experience across role boundaries, and to use the SEDA and the network of collaborative research as one set of procedures for comparing and contrasting local experience, for aggregating it to the units for which decisions have often to be made, and for sharpening and resolving disputed beliefs and interpretations.

Perhaps the biggest single demand made by almost every user of SEDA has been for the "localisation" of accounts. Localisation can be seen, obviously, as an attempt to make information more appropriate to the arena of action; but also as an attempt to assimilate information produced in the mode of survey research to the user's established matrix of knowledge and experience assembled from other sources. Localisation is, therefore, an attempt (i) to assess the validity of new information and findings and, sometimes, (ii) to judge whether, and how far, to adjust belief and practice in the light of new information. Ultimately localisation is an attempt, therefore, to grasp meaning, improve understanding and move towards action.

Indeed the collaborative model may facilitate closer links between enquiry and action. We have been struck on several occasions by the fact that, when (say) an administrator has convinced himself of the need for change partly by drawing on SEDA and its wider context of group discussion, he has seen the participation of others in the collaborative programme as a helpful step towards securing agreement on the case for change among those whose activities would be affected by it. More generally, as we shall

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argue in section 8, collective actions that are both voluntary and based on shared knowledge are likely both to be more effective and to produce better explanations.

Learning proceeds not only through the study of particular, often local, situations but also through comparison; it is here that questions of the control of the production and dissemination of knowledge most often arise. Comparison with other times, persons, and places is the basis both of identity and of judgements of worth. It helps make sense of data and thereby makes learning possible. However, because learning is always a social act, comparison must be made explicit, and can therefore be threatening. Those at risk include individuals, schools, subject constituencies and the state. Their consent is crucial; without it there can be, in the long run, no samples, no comparison, and no learning. Yet such consent will only be maintained if collaborators are convinced of the value of an open research process for learning, and of their ability to defend themselves effectively against invidious comparison; that is, consent requires that the research process itself be made accountable.

This is an argument that we try to convey to collaborators both through our actions and through the accounts we give of them. Thus the *Newsletter* in particular carries not only analysis and discussion that exemplify collaborative research in action, but also explicit discussion of this meta-theory of research.

We can point to many examples of "collaborative research in action" and to apparent changes in practitioners' attitudes and practice, in central and local government and in the schools. However, we also recognise that the programme has yet to survive a research-based exchange between parties on a bitterly contested issue and it has yet to show that it can maintain its values and practices when, and if, the funding shifts away from the SSRC and more onto central and local government. Nor have we reached a time when individual schools, perhaps the most important point where experiential and survey-based accounts intersect, can be opened to public discussion. Schools are not publicly (continued)

identified in the SEDA; the smallest unit so far used in analyses has been a group of six schools. Yet the school is the point at which the potential for learning from the juxtaposition of the two different modes of knowledge (experiential and survey-based) is perhaps at its greatest; not surprisingly, it is also the point at which the question of the control of research is most sensitive.

Could this dilemma be solved, through all parties accepting the new form of authority that we envisage, both accounts and accountability would improve.

7. The methodology and epistemology of collaborative research and of other research approaches

In this section we present a more general discussion of the principles of a collaborative approach to research, and contrast them with other current approaches. In the concluding section, (8), we will show how the theory of collaborative research can offer a guide to action.

The central principle of collaborative research is based on a theory of resources: that is, that research can never command resources on anything like the scale that the public practice of critical rationality requires unless it attaches itself to the authority of government and exploits the learning potential of control frames as defined in section 5. However, we have also argued (in section 4) that, under current arrangements, the accounts produced by and on the authority of government are politically and epistemologically restricted. Collaborative research assumes that such restrictions will only be avoided if the production of accounts embodies the principles of openness, voluntarism and its own accountability.

These principles aim to ensure that the restricted scope and perspectives, that result from government's unwillingness to be challenged and from its use of administrative categories, are supplemented by other interests and perspectives. For example, information supplied by participants will be more reliable if they recognise the legitimacy of the (accountable) research

process which it serves. Moreover, because those ultimately supplying the information may also be involved in its processing, analysis and use, they will be more sensitive to the meaning of "good data" and to the problematic foundations on which analysis and interpretation rest. In short these principles make it possible to exploit the control frames which, we have argued, are the only resource that could conceivably sustain the empirical activities that are entailed by theorising in the social sciences.

Collaborative research seeks therefore to generate a new kind of authority for the research process, grounded in a general acceptance of the value of research and of the possibility of using research evidence to help resolve disagreements in a reasoned way; in a recognition that the right to understand social processes entails a reciprocal obligation to divulge information; and in a trust that, in an open system committed to principles of rationality and accountability, the worst abuses of information can be avoided.

Underlying this prescription is the principle of an inextricable link between the political and the epistemological requirements for public agreement and therefore for accountability. Collaborative research thus rejects the brand of "positivism" which assumes a separation between the scientist, with his concepts and theories, and the world he is studying. Such positivism ignores the reflexivity of social science and the effects of the theories of social scientists on the consciousness and hence the behaviour of those they study. Moreover, it ignores the social context of the scientist, his need to share meanings with actors in order to study their actions, and the sense in which even the logical and procedural rules of science must ultimately be grounded in social conventions.

Ironically, recent schools of thought which rightly oppose this kind of positivism have also tended to ignore the importance of the social and political organisation of research. They have criticised the tendency of this positivism uncritically to embrace the goals and perspectives of those in authority and to conceal them in an ostensibly objective methodology of quantitative social science. They have proposed alternative modes of research which tend to be small-scale and phenomenological; modes which attempt not to impose unilateral and final conclusions but to negotiate

meanings and interpretations with the actors studied and to stimulate an exchange of perspectives and interpretations among different groups of actors.

Whilst we agree with most of the ends of these critics, we feel that they ignore the difficulties encountered in finding means to achieve them, for they fail to say how they will derive the authority and the resources for research or make it effective in the political sphere. Their instinct is to side with the "underdog" against authority; but they do not explain how it is that research which takes this stance can ever get established, or be given adequate resources by the authority which it opposes. Their emphasis on small-scale processes and on the provisionality and negotiability of conclusions, their unwillingness to test insights rather than merely retail them, their reluctance to generalise and to accept that critical public discussion could ever, in principle, persuade people of the preferability of one of several competing accounts, together make them unable to deal with the problems of explanation, authority and control which exist both on a "micro" and a "macro" level.

Two other aspects of collaborative research, its methodology and its epistemology, can also be contrasted with other research approaches.

Methodology Some workers in the sociology of education and in the theory and practice of educational evaluation have recently criticised quantitative methodology, especially that associated with large-scale surveys. These critics aim to progress "beyond the numbers game", arguing that quantitative methodology tends to be insensitive to its subject matter. They claim that this methodology requires the premature closure of categories which must be determined before the research goes into the field; and that the use of categories which aim at generalisability renders them insensitive to finer nuances of meaning or to more localised differentiation. Moreover, they argue that the categories used in quantitative research tend to be the categories of "control"; that they incorporate official judgements and criteria for evaluation which are left implicit and hidden behind a veneer of sophisticated quantification; and that they cannot accommodate unexpected events. Quantitative methodology, it is claimed, is unsuited both for the expression of the provisionality of accounts or for the plurality of values which might be attached to them.

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We accept that *as conventionally organised* quantitative research does frequently display these faults. However, they are not *necessary* consequences of its methodology. Moreover, the alternatives which its critics practise display many weaknesses which are equally serious, if not more so. By focussing on micro-sociological situations and processes these alternatives tend to ignore the macro-sociological, and especially political, contexts in which these situations are located and which ultimately condition them. Whilst we recognise that the classroom itself can plausibly be seen as a political arena, and that "micro"research can therefore talk about certain kinds of political processes and values, research which leaves the political values and processes of the wider society implicit is obviously unsuitable for accountability. Furthermore, such research tends to describe the specific, small-scale situation in terms that are often private, and that inhibit generalisation, replication and cumulative learning; it is therefore inadequate to sustain the kind of debate which, on epistemological as well as political grounds, is required in the production of adequate accounts.

But, acting on its theory of resources, a collaborative approach to research can exploit the advantages of quantitative methods while often avoiding many of their disadvantages. Because of the scale on which they are collected, the data can be designed to be flexible and responsive; they can be stored in considerable detail so that alternative classifications or combinations of variables can readily be produced; and they can cover a wide range of topics, designed to accommodate a plurality of perspectives and interests. Moreover, in the course of recurrent data-sweeps the categories employed in the collection of data can be adapted in response to the subject matter, to the outcome of earlier debates, and to the expressed concerns of the participants who share the control of the research. These activities do not necessarily displace "micro"research. Indeed, the whole process of collaborative research can provide a context in which debate is encouraged, alternative perspectives and interpretations are fostered, participants can be made aware of the provisionality of accounts, and provisional agreements can be reached.

Epistemology Other critics of "positivist" approaches have adopted various forms of epistemological relativism. They claim that "positivism"

is mechanistic, and ignores the subjectivities of social actors, but that social science explanations must refer to the consciousness of actors. They often, however, take this to mean that the actor's account of an event is at least "as good as" the observer's, or any one else's, account. Yet this conclusion does not follow from the subjective nature of social life, for it ignores social *structural* processes of which the actor may be unaware. Other relativist arguments are based on the plurality of values, and (in effect) on a denial that fact and value can ever be effectively separated; it is claimed that each account is relative to a particular set of values and that there are no absolute criteria for choosing among accounts.

We accept the importance of actors' understandings, the epistemological and political arguments for a plurality of perspectives and the eternal nature of value disputes, and therefore of politics. However, in ignoring the need for criteria to distinguish between better and worse accounts, an apparently radical critique in fact incorporates an epistemological and a political conservatism: epistemological conservatism, because knowledge cannot advance without better accounts superseding worse ones; political conservatism, because the structural context of events tends to be ignored, and because relativism denies the possibility of rules for producing the agreements that are required, by definition, for accountability.

We recognise that in this section we have elided and incompletely discussed several approaches to research. There are, however, two fundamental respects in which a collaborative approach is distinctive: first, the insistence that research needs the authority and resources of government; and second, a recognition that men can resolve disputes and can sometimes do so on rational grounds.

8. Theory and action

From one point of view our account of collaborative research will doubtless appear as naively utopian, asking men so to outreach themselves that our argument can be discounted both as a plausible critique of much of the current organisation of social research and also as a moral and tactical guide to action. We have already suggested that the onus is

perhaps on those who react in this way to say just what men can hope to achieve in the way of accounts and of accountability if they embrace a view of man as opaque, solipsistic, and unreasonable. We want in this final section to indicate how the theory and practice of collaborative research might be developed to provide better accounts and to guide practical action with respect both to the world described by social research and also to the world of the social researcher.

We have taken as the core problem of accountability the failure to develop political and epistemological rules using which we can adequately *re-present* human experience and agree (persuade others) about what is the case and about what should be done. This may possibly be a familiar definition of the problem of political accountability, but our linking it to the problem of how we know about and explain human actions is perhaps more novel and requires us to say more about the nature of social explanation.

Explanations tell us why things, in happening the way they did, did not happen in ways that they might have done. All social explanations, whether framed in terms of causes, probabilities, or meanings, therefore refer to the possibility of alternatives; to the fact that men might always wish, and can sometimes try, to be other than they are. The problem this poses for social science, and also for politics, is that the range of alternative possibilities that men can imagine for themselves is very wide. Accordingly, both problems and explanations may appear in different lights when set against the backdrop of different conceptions of the possibilities for human existence. Such conceptions are important because they enable us intellectually to transform mere "conditions" from the status of "givens" to that of "problems", and to consider the extent to which their redress lies within men's power. Hence the need for a set of rules for sifting these conceptions; without such rules we should never be able to agree on what is problematic, nor on the adequacy of particular explanations of a problem, nor on the action that might be indicated.

There are, however, several inescapable aspects of political life which social science must acknowledge: the influence of values and imagination on both explanations and actions; the need for conventional, as well as for scientific, rules for producing agreements, and the recurrent need to act in situations of bounded rationality.

We do not believe that social science can displace these aspects of political life but we do think that a collaborative approach can, first, make explicit the rational elements in conventional rules for agreement (for example, the rationality implicit in the idea of "one man, one vote") and thereby make such rules amenable to improvement. Second, with respect to action in situations of bounded rationality, collaborative social science can do two things: (i) it can make explicit the theories that underlie all purposive action, and open them to critical discussion; (ii) also, although no explanation can uniquely indicate action in the simple sense of "telling one what to do", it can open up actions to more immediate critical revision on the basis of the evidence that emerges in the course of such critical discussion.

Third, because it learns from variations in human behaviour, and their correlates, social science arguably has a special contribution to make to critical public discussion. Also, by modelling the interdependence of variables and of the associations among variables, it offers ways of thinking systematically about alternative worlds; about how much the world would change if this or that bit of it were changed.

Through its modelling social science can draw attention to the choices that have to be made between such values as freedom and equality. It can also demonstrate the priorities implicit in existing actions, and point to contradictions between these priorities and the professed values of men. Men can be pressed, through rational discussion, either to change their actions or to acknowledge that their values are not those that they profess. Social science can also help men to find ways of avoiding this dilemma; it can inform their search for alternative conditions under which social values are less stark alternatives.

However, there is never any *certainty* that the existing relationships observed by social science will hold under different conditions. This is, first, because of the reflexive nature of social explanation; and second, because the generalisations of social science must be based on the existing range of variation, and this range can always be imagined to be broader. Nor can relationships within the existing range of variation necessarily be extrapolated to the future. Imagination must always supplement empirically-based theory in scientific and political discussion. Social science is

nevertheless valuable in that it suggests the possibility of alternatives and offers a set of rules for beginning to think about them in relation to action. It provides hypotheses about the effects of intervention against which the intended and unintended consequences of actual interventions can be judged, the need for corrective action determined, the original model (perhaps) refined, and agreements reached on further action.

Our argument is therefore that knowledge develops through the dialogue of action and scientific process. Social science can *begin* such a dialogue; but how do we envisage it continuing in a way that would improve accounts and accountability? We see this happening through social science itself becoming accountable, that is, intelligible to, and usable by, all persons. This is why we have tried to involve all interests in the education system, however potentially conflicting: employers (education authorities) and employees (teachers), local and central government, professionals and administrators, and so on. The argument we offer to them as separate, sectional interests is that collaborative research can help define or re-define their problems, and start to solve them. Our thinking is that, when collaborators use research to solve their immediate problems, the logic of their practical involvement in a context in which other interests are also practically involved makes it harder for them to deny (i) the location of their originally defined problem in a particular division of labour (that is, in their perspectives as administrators, teachers and so on); (ii) the existence of competing problem-definitions and explanations elsewhere in this division of labour; (iii) the need for rules to resolve disputes between competing problem-definitions and explanations none of which, in our collaborative model, can establish itself as authoritative on the basis of a monopolistic access to research facilities; and (iv) the need for openness among all parties to maintain the research resources (sampling frames, sources of information, and so on) that might contribute to the operation of such rules and that have proved to be useful in dealing with practical problems.

We would hope, of course, that anyone could be convinced of these points of view by argument alone; but they can be pressed more strongly on collaborators precisely because they have already involved themselves in the pro- 34
duction and use of knowledge. Their actions have thereby made them more

vulnerable to rationality. For example, they will recognise the rules of the research process or at least find it harder to reject them in relation to arguments that they dislike, if they themselves have used the same rules in pursuit of arguments that they do like. The longer this practical involvement continues, and the more visible the product of such involvements, the more likely it is, we feel, that practitioners will also accept the principles of collaborative research. By making social science more accountable in this way, that is, by trying to make its practice more open, intelligent (understanding), voluntary and universal, one can begin to overcome many of the deficiencies in the current production of accounts that we have outlined in sections 4 and 5.

Most important, however, we believe that a collaborative approach offers the best prospect for improving the relationship between knowledge and action, that is, for improving the capacity of social science to learn from what people do and to help people to act in the light of that knowledge. The wider the agreement of the actors involved in a particular intervention or undertaking, the more likely it is that the unfolding action will be adjusted to correspond either to their original, agreed, intentions or to their agreed re-formulations; also, the more likely it is that those involved will be able to learn from the gap between intended and observed outcomes. As agreement enhances control, so does it also enhance the applicability of the social science model and of the possibility of resolving disputes through appeals to evidence. This, by definition, would contribute to an improvement both in the accounts that social science can offer and also in the accountability of the system. It would also offer procedures for talking about imaginable alternatives through action and through the tighter modelling of better data. In simple terms, it would increase the rationality of procedural rules for agreement by persuading men that they had much to gain, in terms of control over their future, from such an increase.

We find a collaborative theory attractive because it offers a way out of the cycle of ignorance in which men will not use social science because of its weak explanations which themselves remain weak because men will not use it. Such a theory allows one to contemplate the utopia of a free, and equally-powered, exchange of critical argument amongst all men that is implied alike by the epistemology of social science and by the idea of

democratic accountability, and to do so without many of the practical difficulties of utopianism. We do not have to wait for holistic social change; the theory, rather, implies a programme of practical action which can be undertaken now by one sector, *academe*, in order to argue, coax or otherwise press others into agreement. It quite explicitly allows for sectional interest and conflict, for value differences, the role of imagination and, therefore, for politics. Its strategy is based only on the assumption that, to the extent that men make knowledge claims in order to legitimate power, they make themselves vulnerable to rationality and to things going wrong; they may therefore be persuaded that they have an interest in getting things to go right and thus in the openness and criticism that make possible the considered revision of action.

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